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Graduating from a life of crime

By: Raheem Hosseini

It was one of the unlikeliest graduation ceremonies to take place this summer.

Instead of bright-eyed teens in flowing gowns and golden tassels, 16 denimed inmates from California State Prison, Sacramento graduated from a newly established pre-apprenticeship program last Wednesday.

The Career Technical Education-Carpentry program teaches inmates construction skills they can ply toward full-scale apprenticeship and eventual union jobs when paroled.

The first of its kind in the nation, the pilot program at Folsom Prison reflects a partnership between the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council and Prison Industry Authority, a state organization that provides job assignments for California's incarcerated population.

Last week at the Green Valley Fire Camp, located atop the highest elevation point in Sacramento County, prison and union officials championed the program as both a boon to the economy and as a potential tonic for recidivism rates.

"We would prefer the inmates become taxpayers instead of tax recipients," said Prison Industry Authority General Manager Charles Pattillo, acting as master of ceremonies during the graduation. "We believe the pre-apprentice program serves as a model for other (institutions) to follow."

State Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Secretary James Tilton said he'd like to see the program develop further, adding the department is seeking additional resources from the state Legislature to pour into rehabilitative programs.

On top of the typical \$200 of gate money paroled inmates receive, graduates of this program are eligible for placement in a full-scale apprenticeship program through the Carpenters Training Committee of Northern California.

PIA has agreed to pay the initial union dues and provide a full complement of tools to those inmates who complete the program and enter Carpenters Local 46.

The apprenticeship lasts four years and provides college credits, as well as paid on-the-job training to the tune of \$10 an hour.

"This is just a stepping stone for you to become more successful," said Mavis McAllister, community outreach coordinator for Northern California Carpenters Council. "This is truly a ground breaking program."

That could almost be taken literally, as inmates enrolled in the training program converted the modular units at the



In a first of its kind program, 16 Folsom Prison inmates graduated from the newly established pre-apprentice program last Wednesday. The Career Technical Education-Carpentry program teaches inmates construction skills they can ply toward full-scale apprenticeship and eventual union jobs when paroled. Raheem Hosseini/The Telegraph

previously vacant Green Valley Fire Camp into a training and engineering center for PIA and the prison.

The genesis for the program's existence at Folsom Prison, incidentally, came from the need for more women in construction, said Cheryl Jackson of the carpenters' council.

The council has a goal of graduating a student body made up of 20 percent women in each carpenter's program explained. Getting the pilot program off the ground in Folsom makes it easier to start them at other institutions, in Chowchilla Women's Prison near Fresno.

Another goal, said McAllister, was creating a friendlier professional relationship between the state and the union state currently uses inmates for a number of construction projects, which has created tensions with unions losing those contracts. By bringing former inmates into the unions, the state and union groups seem to be meeting half

Of course, the reasons behind the partnership mattered little to those graduating last week.

Inmates Robert Yannone, Kevin Solwick and Michael Leon showed off the spiffed-up modular units and agreed apprenticeship program offered appealing opportunities.

Inmates Oscar Ochoa and Ruben Gonzalez, whose mother Dorothy attended the graduation ceremony, have few months left on their terms, respectively. A program that offers college credits toward an associate's degree as well as hourly wage that would make most entry-level workers blush holds a draw, they agreed.

And inmate Steve Garcia could only wait until next term when he would be enrolled in the program.

During an impassioned address, Office of Substance Abuse parole agent J.D. Garcia gave the graduating class message. "If we do not prepare you for society, we lose our society," he said.

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